

Sestina

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September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now; but the child
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house.
Tidying up, the old grandmother
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house
feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.
I know what I know, says the almanac.
With crayons the child draws a rigid house
and a winding pathway. Then the child
puts in a man with buttons like tears
and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,
the little moons fall down like tears

from between the pages of the almanac
into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

Elizabeth Bishop

Histoire

¶

Tina and Seth met in the midst of an overcrowded militarism.
"Like a drink?" he asked her. "They make great Alexanders over at the Marxism-Leninism."
She agreed. They shared cocktails. They behaved cautiously, as in a period of pre-fascism.
Afterwards he suggested dinner at a restaurant renowned for its Maoism.
"O.K.," she said, but first she had to phone a friend about her ailing Afghan, whose name was Racism.
Then she followed Seth across town past twilit alleys of sexism.

The waiter brought menus and announced the day's specials. He treated them with condescending sexism,
So they had another drink. Tina started her meal with a dish of militarism,
While Seth, who was hungrier, had a half portion of stuffed baked racism.
Their main dishes were roast duck for Seth, and for Tina broiled Marxism-Leninism.

Tina had pecan pie à la for dessert, Seth a compote of stewed Maoism.
They lingered. Seth proposed a liqueur. They rejected sambuca and agreed on fascism.

During the meal, Seth took the initiative. He inquired into Tina's fascism,
About which she was reserved, not out of reticence but because Seth's sexism
Had aroused in her a desire she felt she should hide – as though her Maoism
Would willy-nilly betray her feelings for him. She was right. Even her deliberate militarism

Couldn't keep Seth from realizing that his attraction was reciprocated. His own Marxism-Leninism

Became manifest, in a compulsive way that piled the Ossa of confusion on the Peleion of racism.

Next, what? Food finished, drinks drunk, bills paid — what racism
Might not swamp their yearning in an even greater confusion of fascism?
But women are wiser than words. Tina rested her hand on his thigh and, a-twinkle with Marxism-Leninism,
Asked him, "My place?" Clarity at once abounded under the flood-lights of sexism,
They rose from the table, strode out, and he with the impetuousness of young militarism
Hailed a cab to transport them to her lair, heaven-haven of Maoism.

In the taxi he soon kissed her. She let him unbutton her Maoism
And stroke her resilient skin, which was quivering with shudders of racism.
When beneath her jeans he sense the superior Lycra of her militarism,
His longing almost strangled him. Her little tongue was as potent as fascism
In its elusive certainty. He felt like then and there tearing off her sexism,
But he reminded himself: "Pleasure lies in patience, not in the greedy violence of Marxism-Leninism."

Once home, she took over. She created a hungering aura of Marxism-Leninism
As she slowly undressed him where he sat on her overstuffed art-deco Maoism,
Making him keep still, so that she could indulge in caresses, in sexism,
In the pursuit of knowing him. He groaned under the exactness of her racism
— Fingertip sliding up his nape, nails incising his soles, teeth nibbling his fascism.

At last she guided him to bed, and they lay down on a patchwork of Old American militarism.

Biting his lips, he plunged his militarism into the popular context of her Marxism-Leninism,
Easing one thumb into her fascism, with his free hand coddling the tip of her Maoism,
Until, gasping with appreciative racism, both together sink into the revealed glory of sexism.

Harry Matthews

Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape

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The first of the undecoded messages read: "Popeye sits in thunder,
Unthought of. From that shoebox of an apartment,
From livid curtain's hue, a tangram emerges: a country."
Meanwhile the Sea Hag was relaxing on a green couch: "How pleasant
To spend one's vacation en la casa de Popeye," she scratched
Her cleft chin's solitary hair. She remembered spinach

And was going to ask Wimpy if he had bought any spinach.
"M'love," he intercepted, "the plains are decked out in thunder
Today, and it shall be as you wish." He scratched
The part of his head under his hat. The apartment
Seemed to grow smaller. "But what if no pleasant
Inspiration plunge us now to the stars? For this is my country."

Suddenly they remembered how it was cheaper in the country.
Wimpy was thoughtfully cutting open a number 2 can of spinach
When the door opened and Swee'pea crept in. "How pleasant!"
But Swee'pea looked morose. A note was pinned to his bib. "Thunder
And tears are unavailing," it read. "Henceforth shall Popeye's apartment
Be but remembered space, toxic or salubrious, whole or scratched."

Olive came hurtling through the window; its geraniums scratched
Her long thigh. "I have news!" she gasped. "Popeye, forced as you know to flee
the country
One musty gusty evening, by the schemes of his wizened, duplicate father,
jealous of the apartment
And all that it contains, myself and spinach
In particular, heaves bolts of loving thunder
At his own astonished becoming, rupturing the pleasant

Arpeggio of our years. No more shall pleasant
Rays of the sun refresh your sense of growing old, nor the scratched
Tree-trunks and mossy foliage, only immaculate darkness and thunder."
She grabbed Swee'pea. "I'm taking the brat to the country."
"But you can't do that--he hasn't even finished his spinach,"
Urged the Sea Hag, looking fearfully around at the apartment.

But Olive was already out of earshot. Now the apartment
Succumbed to a strange new hush. "Actually it's quite pleasant

Here," thought the Sea Hag. "If this is all we need fear from spinach
Then I don't mind so much. Perhaps we could invite Alice the Goon over"--she
scratched

One dug pensively--"but Wimpy is such a country
Bumpkin, always burping like that." Minute at first, the thunder

Soon filled the apartment. It was domestic thunder,
The color of spinach. Popeye chuckled and scratched
His balls: it sure was pleasant to spend a day in the country.

John Ashbery

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